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ABSTRACT

The importance of students' nonverbal communication in classroom interaction is pointed out in this short essay. Several examples of nonverbal communication are provided in order to illustrate the confusion in classrooms which can result from teachers' lack of understanding of pupils' conscious and unconscious attempts to communicate nonverbally. Dimensions of nonverbal communication discussed include eye contact, intonation, gestures, hand raising, touch, facial expression, posture, grouping, space, and furniture arrangement. It is concluded that teachers should increase their own and their students' conscious reliance on nonverbal communication. Ways of increasing understanding of nonverbal processes in classroom settings are suggested. (RH)

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WHAT ARE THE KIDS REALLY SAYING?

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WHAT ARE THE KIDS REALLY SAYING?

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Approx. 2400 words.

Do we understand what our students are telling us? We may feel fairly sure that we do, but let us take a closer look. The students might be saying more, or less, or something entirely different than what we perceive them as saying.

We have become well aware of how teacher expectations of behavior and achievement are communicated to the students through non-verbal communications. However, much less research has been done on how the non-verbal communications of the students affects the teacher. It affects not only new teachers, but seasoned veterans as well.

If we are to understand what our students are sometimes desperately trying to tell us, it is important that we attempt to understand their non-verbal behavior. Many times, the students themselves are unaware of what they are communicating because it happens on an unconscious level. It is vitally important that the teacher not misread the students' conscious and unconscious attempts at non-verbal communication. Sometimes, through wordless communication, students lead the teacher to think what they want them to think, and thus avoid reality.

How we wpeak is more important than the words we use. As one teacher expressed it, "What you do speaks so loud that I can't hear what you say." The inflection, or intonation, of our voice can convey the exact opposite of what our words say.

Quite early students acquire the overt behaviors which they know are required of them. They pretend to be listening, appear to be busy on

assignments, nod their heads to show agreement or understanding and raise their hands at the appropriate time.

They sometimes avoid a teacher's attempt at eye contact thus avoiding further communication. On the other hand the teacher can become very uncomfortable under a student's deliberate stare.

A student's unconscious gestures may, at times, tell a teacher more than the student consciously wants the teacher to know. The student may send non-verbal messages and be quite unaware of it. His non-verbal message may even contradict his words.

The teacher may discover that the teaching methods he/she is using aren't holding the student's attention. They may even be discouraging the student's interest.

Facial expression is a kind of gesture which can also effectively emphasize, or contradict, the words a student uses.

How a student uses or reacts to the use of groups, personal space and furniture arrangement in the classroom may also give the teacher some vital information about the student's needs.

The following cases are examples of confusion in classrooms due to a lack of understanding of the student's conscious and unconscious attempts to communicate with their teachers. We will explore the areas of: eye contact, intonation, gestures, touch, space, facial expression, posture, grouping and furniture arrangement.

EYE CONTACT:

Case 1. A teacher in an inner city school with a large population of Mexican-Americans is scolding a young boy for a misdemeanor.

"Look me in the eye and tell me you didn't hit Johnny." she angrily demands. The child respectfully looks at the floor. She berates the boy

for not being honest. He couldn't "look her in the eye." However, the boy has been taught at home that it is bad manners to make direct eye contact with adults.

Case 2. In another room down the hall, a teacher asks, "Carmen, did you take Judy's pencils from her desk? Tell me the truth." Carmen looks the teacher straight in the eyes and says, "No, I didn't take her pencils. I didn't even know she had them." Another student looks at Carmen and gently shakes her head in disbelief, she knows that Carmen has Judy's pencils. The teacher however, is convinced, because Carmen has learned that direct eye contact lends credibility.

Case 3. In a senior high school, a student sits with his chin in his hand, maintaining direct and strong eye contact with the teacher. His eyes follow her around the room as she explains certain concepts. She looks at him form time to time and smiles. She does not call on him for any answers to questions, as she usually does to keep the attention of the class. She feels sure that he is listening because of his continuous eye contact. The fact is that he did not read the required material in preparation for class, and knows that constant eye contact will assure that the teacher will not call on him.

INTONATION

Case 1. After explaining a concept for the fourth time to a student, the teacher tips her head on one side, looks intensely at the boy and asks, "Do you understand?" She emphasizes the last word. "Yep, Yeah, I got it, okay," the boy replies, speaking quickly and in a monotone. He turns and walks away, attention still focused on the paper in his hands.

The teacher gives a sigh of relief. The boy gives her a surreptitious look of exasperation. He goes to his desk and asks the boy in front of him the same question he just asked the teacher. Did he mean it when he told the teacher that he understood?

Case 2. A young teacher in her second year of teaching math in junior high has just assigned seatwork to her class. One boy doesn't seem to grasp the concept being presented. He asks repeatedly for help. Finding herself helping him to the exclusion of others, she suggests that he come to see her during study hall or after school.

"Oh yeah, thanks loads. You're a big help," he replies. However, his tone of voice is sarcastic, telling the teacher that she is everything but a help. She is very upset.

GESTURES:

Case 1. A sixth grade teacher is handing out test materials. The students have been asking quesitons before class. She has answered the questions, but seeing that time was running out, says, "Let's get on with the test, you can let me know on the test whether or not you understand." As the test is being administered, she notices fidgeting, drumming fingers, tapping shoes, constant readjustment of postures, scratching, pulling hair, picking at clothing. She begins to have an uneasy feeling about how the scores on the test will turn out. She begins to feel that perhaps she didn't cover the material adequately.

Case 2. An attractive eighth grade teacher is lecturing to a class on the causes of the civil war. A boy is constantly drumming his fingers, tapping his shoe sole against the metal rung on his chair, dropping books, pencils, or other small objects. The teacher looks directly at him,

motions for him to be quiet, and walks around the room to stand beside him for a few moments. He is quiet for a short period of time, then begins his disturbing noises all over again. He is getting the teacher's attention when he wants it.

Case 3. A teacher is scolding a boy for running in the hall. He looks impatiently past the teacher, shrugs his shoulders repeatedly. "Don't do it again," she says with emphasis. He walks quickly down the hall, around the corner, and as soon as he is out of sight of the teacher he runs the rest of the way down the hall to the playground outside.

HAND RAISING

Raising of hands is accepted school behavior. It is not consciously learned, but instead is unconsciously absorbed as children progress in school. When a student knows the answer to a question, wants to ask a question, or wants to contribute to class discussion, he knows exactly how and when to raise his hand. The following examples illustrate techniques of hand raising.

A boy raises his hand to avoid being called on. He keeps it low and out of sight, but raised.

A little girl raises her hand, waving frantically. It is supported by the other arm, and her body, as she leans forward. She wants very much to be called on.

A high school girl raises her hand and slowly waves it back and forth. She wants to let teacher know that she knows the answer but doesn't care if she is called on or not.

A third grader raises her hand high, eyes looking directly and intently at the teacher. Her gesture says, "Please call on me!"

Henry raises his hand half way, but gazes at another student. He says, in gesture, "I think I know the answer, but please call on John."

Mary's hand is raised slowly while she looks at her book. Her message is, "I think I know the answer and want to impress you, but I'm not sure." If she is called on, her answer is in the form of a question.

TOUCH:

Case 1. A small first grader, Susan, is always near the teacher. She puts her arm around teacher's waist at recess. During reading groups she sits next to the teacher, making sure that her foot touches the teacher's foot, or elbows or knees frequently touch. Sometimes she reaches out to gently and quietly touch the teacher's dress, or hair, or hand. The teacher tries to ignore all this touching, but it bothers her. She doesn't recognize Susan's persistant plea for the assurance of physical contact.

Case 2. A fourth grade boy, Brad, with an anxious look on his face, bothers other students at his table during a class discussion. His distractive actions become more and more noticable until the teacher walks over to him and lays a disciplinary hand on his shoulder. His look of anxiety is replaced by a small smile of relief. He pays close attention to the subject matter, asking and answering questions, participating in discussion. Teacher walks to the other side of the room. The look of anxiety begins to return to the boy's face. He needs the reassuring, warm hand of the teacher on his shoulder.

FACIAL EXPRESSION:

Some obvious feed backs from facial expression are: looks of puzzlement, incomprehension, questioning. The sensitive teacher immediately backs up in the progress of the lesson and asks, "What is it you don't understand?" or "Do you have any questions?"

Case 1. A child comes up to the teacher's desk to ask a question about a math problem. As the teacher explains, the child never looks at the paper but continues to stare at the teacher with a slight smile.

The teacher looks up and asks, "Do you understand?" The child nods her head, still looking at the teacher. "Are you sure?" asks the teacher feeling slightly uneasy.

"Yes, thank you," answers the child. She smiles and goes to her seat. She knew how to work the math problem, but wanted the teacher's individual attention.

Case 2. A first year teacher is lecturing to her high school history class. The students look at one another, questioningly, as teacher explains a new concept. One student closes the text, puts her head down and closes her eyes, a boy closes his book, folds his arms and slumps down in his desk, gazes at the ceiling. The teacher seems completely unaware of these actions and drones on, gradually losing the interest of all the students.

POSTURE:

Case 1. A boy stares out the window as the teacher lectures. The teacher repeatedly calls on him and tells him to stop daydreaming. The boy wears an annoyed, frustrated look when the teacher does this. He finds it easier to concentrate on the teacher's lecture if he avoids the distractions of other students and fastens his gaze instead on the leaves of an oak tree outside the window.

Case 2. The teacher is scolding a student for passing notes in class. The student stands with weight on one foot, arms folded across chest, head to one side, gazing patiently at the floor. She's telling the teach-

er, "If I must listen to you, I'll endure it, but please hurry up and finish. My patience is running thin.

GROUPING:

Case 1. Second grade children are called to a reading group. They bring their chairs to the reading corner and arrange them in a tight circle around the teacher. The first to arrive are close to the teacher, those arriving a little later must begin a second row. They lose the prestige which goes to those who made the first row. However, some are unhappy to be beaten out of the first row, while others are relieved. They deliberately stalled until they were excluded from the front row. They did not want the teacher's close scrutiny. They feel unprepared for today's reading. The teacher notices that certain students always sit in the second row.

Case 2. The P.E. teacher calls the students to a particular place in the gym to sit down and discuss volleyball skills. Two students, who are rather poor in these skills and not wishing to particiapte, sit to the extreme side of the group so as to be even out of the teacher's peripheral vision.

SPACE:

Case 1. Susan, a sophomore in high school, enters the counselor's office. The side of his desk is toward the door. Susan walks up to the desk and asks Mr. Cant if he can talk to her for a few minutes. He steps toward her in a friendly manner. She steps back three steps. He pulls a chair close to his chair and asks her to be seated. She accepts, but before doing so, absent mindedly moves the chair back to its original position before being seated. She doesn't want her personal space bubble to be invaded.

Case 2. A teacher is gently reprimanding a 4th grader on the playground. She steps close to him so as not to have to speak loudly. The student feels threatened by the closeness of the teacher. He steps back two steps. The teacher grabs his arm. "Don't walk away when I'm talking to you!" she says firmly, moving still closer. The boy, in discomfort, pulls even further away. This sequence continues until the teacher angrily sends the boy inside. She invaded his personal space and lost the effect of her discipline.

Case 3. A third grade girl comes to the teacher, who is standing at the front of the class while the students work on seat work. She wants the answer to a question, but is embarrassed to ask. She comes close to the teacher. The teacher, offended by the girl's bad breath and body odor, unconsciously steps back. The girl steps in closer, and the teacher again steps back. After a third try to come closer to the teacher, the girl gives a sigh and returns to her seat.

"What did you want, Janey?" the teacher asks in exasperation.

FURNITURE ARRANGEMENT:

During small reading groups third graders are asked to bring their chairs to the reading corner. Jimmy, an aggressive child, wants to sit in a place close to the teacher but not immediately beside her, because it is harder to make eye contact from that position. He chooses a spot directly in front of the teacher. He pushes another child out of the way to get that spot. Joe, a very quiet, withdrawn child waits until all the others are settled in, then places his chair farthest from the teacher and just a fraction behind the children next to him.

CONCLUSIONS:

It is not easy to always read non-verbal communication correctly. Many times we should check our impressions with a direct question.

Correctly reading non-verbal messages involves openness, understanding and acceptance. Many students have had pressure from home and traditions to "please the teacher." Are the students behaving the way they are because of positive, intrinsic, motivation or simply a desire to "get on the good side" of the teacher?

Let us talk about non-verbal expression with our students themselves. Lead them also to be aware of what they are actually saying. Let us increase the frequency with which everyone consciously relies on non-verbal communication. Ask questions to verify your perceptions of what the students are saying. Ask students to do the same for you and for each other. Ask the students to interpert to you, your non-verbal behavior. Playing games in which pantomine is used to convey messages is useful in helping to increase awareness of non-verbal communication. Take an hour in which no words are to be used in communicating, only actions. Careful observation in such game situations can give us insight into our students' messages. It can also make them more aware of their own actions.

More than half of all our communications are non-verbal. We need to increase our awareness, receptivity and response to the messages we receive as well as those we send.

When what a student "does, speaks so loud that we can't hear what he says", we need to concentrate on what he is really trying to tell us.

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